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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 000668

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SUBJECT: PRD CLAIMS POSSIBLE ELECTION FRAUD; PLD SMELLS A RAT

Classified By: P. Robert Fannin, Ambassador, Reasons 1.4(b), (d)

¶1. (SBU) The opposition Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD) has strongly criticized the new electronic system for transmitting electoral results to the Central Election Board (JCE), with one senior party official even alleging an organized effort to steal the election. The ruling Dominican Liberation Party (PLD) views the PRD's criticism of the JCE as "quite suspicious" and designed to justify their defeat in the May 16 presidential election.

¶2. (SBU) Prior to 1996, when fraud was common in Dominican elections, a lengthy delay in the release of results was seen as an indication that the government was tampering with the vote count. In addition, the PRD believes that the physical transfer of data is open to fraud, alleging that, in recent elections, vote count sheets have been switched while in transit.

¶3. (U) The JCE's electronic scanning and transmission system is designed to speed up the release of election results, e.g. by eliminating the wait for the physical transfer of data to Santo Domingo. In this first year of its implementation, 55 percent of the results will be sent using the new system. Following a test of the system on April 12-13, the PRD (joined for the most part by the third largest party, the PRSC) termed the trial run a failure. The party cited the use in the test of equipment that will not be utilized in the election, the failure of a number of transmission attempts, and the fact that some of the data successfully sent out was not received at JCE headquarters.

¶4. (C) In a meeting with POLOFF, Neney Cabrera, PRD candidate Miguel Vargas Maldonado's national campaign director, alleged an elaborate scheme by the PLD to distort election results. Cabrera said that the PLD had rented an apartment near the JCE where the ruling party would intercept electronically transmitted vote numbers using US\$20 million worth of equipment. The idea, Cabrera contended, was to delay the transmission of results from constituencies where the PRD is strong. This, he argued, would result in the PLD having a large lead when the JCE's "first bulletin" is released, after which many Dominican cease paying attention to the vote count.

¶5. (C) Continuing, Cabrera said that he was sure that this scheme was taking place; that five foreign nationals were in-country working on the plan; that he had been to the apartment where the intercepts would take place; and, that the PLD had pre-determined its margin of victory (52 to 40 percent). POLOFF recommended to Cabrera that he take his concerns directly to the JCE and the two organizations carrying out election observation, the OAS and Participacion

Ciudadana, a respected local NGO.

¶6. (SBU) No other PRD officials have repeated Cabrera's allegation; however, the criticism of the electronic transmission system has come from all quarters of the opposition. Referring to the system, Vargas Maldonado told the press, "That continues to be our biggest concern regarding the election process, and we have made our concerns known to the JCE." The PRD's Political Delegate to the JCE, Virgilio Bello Rosa, said that "the organization of the election process is going well so far, except for the situation with the electronic scanning (system)."

¶7. (SBU) In the PLD's response to the PRD's concerns, it is clear that they smell a rat. In comments to POLOFF, Francisco Javier Garcia, President Fernandez's national campaign director, said he was satisfied with the electronic vote tabulation system and pleased that it would result in an earlier release of the final count. In a statement to the media, Garcia said, "What we observe is that the PRD, for some time, has been trying to delegitimize in some way the electoral results... looking for a cause or reason for the electoral defeat that they will suffer on May 16."

¶8. (U) Participacion Ciudadana, the neutral Dominican NGO that is carrying out an election observation effort with USAID funding, has some concerns regarding the new vote count system, but believes that the problems are correctable. In comments to a USAID officer, Javier Cabreja, Participacion Ciudadana's Executive Director, said that the detection of problems was what the test of the system was designed to accomplish.

¶9. (U) In a recent public report, Participacion Ciudadana recommended that, "The JCE should address the parties'

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(concerns) regarding this issue (and) carry out a new test of the scanning system," but at the same time noted that "all parties acknowledge that the JCE maintains a (backup) system to transmit data physically (that) would permit the correction of possible problems with electronic transmission." (Note: Even if the electronic system functions perfectly, the JCE plans to transmit 100 percent of the results physically, with 55 percent of those results serving as a backup only.)

¶10. (SBU) In a meeting with USAID officers, Roberto Rosario, the President of the JCE's Administrative Chamber, agreed that the system of physically transmitting data on paper would serve as a sufficient backup plan. Rosario said that the JCE would conduct a second test of the system (this time using the same equipment that will be utilized in the election) at the regional level and a third test nationally. The trial runs will take place May 5 and 10, respectively. In addition, the JCE has announced to the press that they expect to begin releasing results by the evening of election day. In further comments to the press, JCE judge Aura Celeste Fernandez sought to ease concerns. She described the election preparation process as excellent and said that, "It's normal for there to be apprehension, because during moments of political tension everyone is always attentive." (Note: There is a consensus here that the current JCE is qualified and independent, if not perfect. Until the PRD's recent comments, the three main political parties also professed this view.)

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Cabrera's allegation of an elaborate scheme by the PLD to distort election results is hard to believe, and he has lost some credibility with us. However, the possibility that the PRD will find some excuse -- may it be a more benign problem with electronic transmission or something else -- to disregard the official election result is all too real. If the opinion polls that show a lead of 15 to 24 percent for the PLD's Fernandez hold true on election day, the PRD and Vargas may be tempted to find a scapegoat for

their loss and to seek to discredit Fernandez's mandate over the next four years. We will continue to recommend to the PRD that they take their concerns directly to the JCE, OAS, and Participacion Ciudadana and will coordinate our position with those organizations.

(U) This report and additional information can be found on Embassy Santo Domingo's SIPRNET site,
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/>
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